

JANUARY 17 WORSHIP SERVICE

Welcome to our worship service at Alexanderwohl, with many of you joining from lots of places.

We gather virtually to worship the Living God who we know through Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow will be Martin Luther King day, which is a fitting backdrop for our second Sunday with the challenging prophetic book of Amos.

Call to Worship – based on Psalm 52, with some strong words very much like Amos; words of both protest and hope

Leader: Why do you boast, O mighty one, of mischief done against the godly?

People: All day long you are plotting destruction.

Leader: Your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery.

You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth.

You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.

People: But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; He will uproot you from the land of the living.

All: The righteous will see, and fear, and will laugh at the evildoer, saying,

“See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought refuge in wealth!”

Leader: But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.

All: I will thank you forever, because of what you have done.

In the presence of the faithful I will proclaim your name, for it is good.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (HWB 732)

Liberating God,

Your Son taught us to pray

for your kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven

Let your kingdom come; let justice roll like a river and righteousness like a never-ending stream.

Let your will be done; let those who mourn be comforted and let those in bondage be set free.

Strengthen our hope in you, O God,

for we long for your everlasting reign. AMEN.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

God of ages,

We trust in your unfailing love that is everlasting.

In your name we continue to hope, for your name is good.

We believe in the new creation that your Son Jesus proclaimed and demonstrated, in which all human beings are together created in your image and are endowed with equally valuable gifts.

In these disorienting times that we live in, we believe the promise of this new creation and that the time is ripe to live within it.

Merciful God, we wait before you, aware of the frailty of the peoples of this earth, especially in this raging pandemic.

We remember that we are dust and to dust we will return.

Yet you are our creator and our redeemer.

Hear our prayers for people who are dear to us, and for our world longing for your light.

God, we pray for Joyce Bergen as she continues to gain some strength back. We pray for success for her cancer treatments and for endurance for Joyce and for Dan. We pray that they are able to find a good rehab place for Joyce not too far from home. May your Spirit give strength and hope to Joyce and Dan.

We offer our prayers for Irvin Voth as his health declines. We pray that your Spirit would be with Irvin as he receives care at Mercy Hospital. We pray for wisdom and strength for Susan in her concern for Irvin. May your comfort and peace be with Irvin and Susan.

We pray for others in our congregation who have Covid or are undergoing treatment for medical issues of any kind. Be with those who feel shaken.

I give thanks for the healing that my mother has experienced as well as for the many expressions of support and care offered to our family.

In times when life is suddenly uncertain and unpredictable, teach us to find our sense of grounding in our faith in Christ – a ground that cannot be shaken no matter what ways our lives feel shaken.

We pray for June Hiebert, for DeVon and DeWayne, and for the rest of their family and friends as they carry the grief of saying good-bye to Don, while also celebrating the very unique and gifted person he was.

We continue to pray for residents and staff at Bethesda Home and all long-term care facilities. We acknowledge the toll of loneliness and isolation. We know of the exhaustion of staff, and most especially nursing staff. We pray for each one to know how to draw a deeper strength from your Spirit.

In these times, we have a better sense of what is most important. Daily life can feel like a challenge, and we are often blessed even more by the support and Christ-like love of others. You are using this time to teach us that we cannot live in a way that has no need of others.

We are a deeply divided country and remain far from the dream of racial justice and reconciliation that Martin Luther King, Jr eloquently envisioned. It is a dream that is grounded in the teachings of Jesus and the hope of the coming of Christ's kingdom.

Give us wisdom, strength, and inspiration to let our discipleship as followers of Jesus make a difference from where we are toward making this dream a reality.

Show us how to live out the shalom that Christ lived out.

May our actions, our way of life, and our words give witness to the Good News of Jesus that is our hope.

Everlasting God,

We praise you for what you have done through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and for what the winds of your spirit continue to do.

We will praise you in the presence of your people and the many witnesses that have gone before us.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR LOIS

As we think about offering to God our gifts and tithes, through the church, I invite you to join me in a prayer for our giving. There is no scarcity. There is no shortage. No lack of love, of compassion, of joy in the world. There is enough. There is more than enough. Only fear and greed make us think otherwise. No one needs to starve. There is enough land and enough food. No one needs to die of thirst. There is enough water. No one needs to live without mercy. There is no end to grace. And we are all instruments of grace. The more we give it, the more we share it, the more we use it, the more you make of it, God. Bless our gifts of money, of love, joy, mercy and grace, given in your name. Amen.

We continue with the prophet Amos this morning, chapter 8, the first 12 verses. I'm reading from the New International Version:

This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: a basket of ripe fruit. "What do you see, Amos?" he asked.

"A basket of ripe fruit," I answered.

Then the Lord said to me, "The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. In that day," declares the Sovereign Lord, "the songs in the temple will turn to wailing. Many, many bodies – flung everywhere! Silence!"

Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying,

“When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?” – skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.

The Lord has sworn by himself, the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget anything they have done. Will not the land tremble for this, and all who live in it mourn? The whole land will rise like the Nile; it will be stirred up and then sink like the river of Egypt. In that day”, declares the Sovereign Lord, “I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day. The days are coming”, declares the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine through the land – not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.”

A FAMINE OF HEARING THE WORDS OF THE LORD – PASTOR LOIS Amos 8:1-12

As we remember and reflect on the life of Martin Luther King this weekend, we return to the book of Amos.

Last week Pastor Caleb introduced us to the ancient prophet Amos, a mere shepherd from Tekoa who prophesied messages of doom to the neighboring nations as well as to his own. He warned that God was terribly unhappy with them because of two big sins – idolatry and social injustice, neglect and oppression of the poor and marginalized. Caleb gave us a Hebrew lesson in which he taught us about the Hebrew word *mishpat*, meaning justice and he explained to us that the way the Hebrew word is formed brings together the ideas of “to judge” or to act for justice, to set things right so that, *mishpat*, justice, is not just a concept but an action that requires one to discern between truth and falsehood. Martin Luther King showed us very well how to both judge and act out of our faith in God, to try to set things right and bring justice in our world.

Today we have another Hebrew lesson; the Hebrew poets and writers liked to see if their audiences were paying attention and they used clever wordplays with the Hebrew. As is often true when moving from one language to another, some of the meaning gets a bit lost in the translation. What Amos says he saw in this vision from the Lord was a basket of ripe fruit and the Lord responds, “The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.” The Hebrew words *qayis*, (kah-yeats) meaning “summer fruit” and *qes* (keats) meaning “end” are the words being played in these verses, and mostly, the similarity of how they sound, but the

meaning, is anything but playful. According to Amos, God has reached the end of his patience with Israel and will no longer spare them from the consequences of their acts of injustice. The fruit that Amos saw in his vision was ripe – overly ripe – rotten. The time of the harvest has come and gone for the people of Israel; their end has come. And while they go through the motions of coming to the temple, to use their religious songs and rituals as cover while their lives plainly illustrate their depravity God warns them through Amos that these same songs will become the sounds of wailing and grieving their dead, death that has come as a consequence of their arrogance and unwillingness to repent of their sinfulness. Again, Amos is warning them that they will not be able to escape God’s judgment of their corrupt economic practices and their empty religious practices.

The prophet goes on then, in painful detail, outlining the specific claims that God is bringing against them. Their misdeeds are not ones of simply not paying attention or being caught up in the larger, systemic evil (which they also did) but of whole-heartedly creating the systems and actively chaffing at God’s covenantal laws.

So they not only ignored and overlooked the needy and the poor they trampled them and intentionally brought them to ruin. The cycle of the moon and the Sabbath were God-ordained days of festival and rest; they complained about not being able to do business on those days. The ephah was a unit of measure and the shekel an amount of currency – everyone knew that you would receive a certain amount of a product in exchange for a certain amount of currency; they intentionally deceived people by changing the measurements and the worth of the amount of currency. They treated people as if they could put a monetary value on them and as if they were worth less than a pair of sandals or the dregs at the bottom of the grain bin.

All of this behavior has made God very angry and in verses 7-10 God says that their deeds will be neither forgotten nor forgiven. And then we read about the terrifying things that will happen across the land as the consequences of their greed and arrogance are borne out. And finally, Amos, speaking for God, predicts a famine – not of food or water – but of hearing the words of the Lord. The people will finally seek God’s words but will not be able to find them through the morass of corruption and complete systemic social evil.

This passage paints a picture of a depth of evil and darkness the likes of which we read in very few places in the Bible. The prophet Amos was big on doom and not much on hope.

One way of getting at a difficult passage like this is to use our imaginations to try to read and understand it from different perspectives. This is a way of helping us to think about how different people, in ancient times as well as now, in 2021 might hear and understand the words of scripture each from their own vantage point. It might be a way for us to begin to try to understand someone whose perspective is very different from our own. For instance, how might a wealthy business owner hear and respond to Amos’ words? Perhaps something like this:

Awww, Amos – lighten up. Why do you have to be such a downer? Everybody does business this way; it's a dog-eat-dog world out there and if you don't make some changes and adapt to the ever-changing tides in the business world you'll never be able to make it. I mean, so we made a few tweaks in the weights and measures and it's now standard practice to sell a 12-ounce pint at the original 16-ounce price. And yeah, the exchange rates for the value of a dollar change all the time... that's how it works! I make my living by strategically keeping up with the latest business trends and staying lean and mean. Frankly, I think it's lame to close the stock market or my business on the weekends and holidays – it infringes on our personal freedoms to not be able to trade and sell and stimulate the economy whenever we want! Thankfully, now with advances in technology you pretty much can trade and sell whenever you want; making money 24/7 – that's the way it oughta be. I mean, that's excellent stewardship – using my God-given gifts... and stimulating the economy... as often and as much as I can! Amos needs to give us a break and get up to speed with current practices. He's stuck back in the day with old, worn out rules and regs. I mean, we're just doing our job. And a darned good one, I might add.

How might a foreigner, maybe an undocumented person hear and respond to Amos' words?

Hmmm... I really had high hopes of finding a better life here – things in my home country are so desperate. Everyone there lives in fear of the gangs and the cartels and in such poverty that it's not really living at all. I thought that if I came here people would have some compassion and kindness. I thought that if I could work hard – which I'm able and willing to do – that maybe I could send some money home or save enough to bring my family here so we could start over. And I thought... I thought that's what people in this country were willing to offer people like me. I thought that's what their faith in God taught them, but I've found a reality quite different. To me, Amos is speaking to that difference. In fact, it seems like he's speaking on my behalf, advocating for me, reminding the people here of what God expects and how God wants them to live, welcoming the stranger and the alien. I really appreciate Amos' words even though I can see that he's not making himself any friends here. Maybe he'll be able to shake them loose and help them to remember their covenant with God.

I wonder how some religious leaders might read and respond to this passage?

Ohhhhhhhh, no... ohhhh, Amos – you need to get a grip. I really wish you'd sit down and be quiet because you are poking a big, angry, bear here. We have this establishment thing firmly under control and you're really messing with it. We preachers and priests have a good thing going here – we work together in lock-step with the government leaders. We listen to each other and help each other “keep the peace”, you know... the kind of peace where everybody stays in their place and doesn't rock the boat. And Amos – these words of yours are dangerous. You're a rabble-rousing outsider, a typical prophet. You're not one of us and you have no business speaking as one who represents the institutional religious perspective. Well... maybe we don't need to get too uptight or worry about you too much. Very few people will really be drawn to your words anyway. Things will settle down and get back to normal soon

and who knows – like lots of other prophets you may just end up dead, wishing you'd kept your mouth shut. And, who will really believe you anyway? I doubt very much that your prophecies will come to pass. They won't... will they?

Let's try to imagine how a person of color might hear these words? Of course, everyone in Amos' world was a person of color, but I'm using this term in today's vernacular. For this, we don't need to use our imaginations as much – we have the actual words of Martin Luther King, Jr. This excerpt is from a speech he gave on December 11, 1961, speaking about the importance of labor unions towards the goal of justice in the work of civil rights:

“Hard-core unemployment is now an ugly and unavoidable fact of life. Like malignant cancer, it has grown year by year and continues its spread. But automation can be used to generate an abundance of wealth for people or an abundance of poverty for millions as its human-like machines turn out human scrap along with machine scrap as a by-product of production. Our society, with its ability to perform miracles with machinery, has the capacity to make some miracles for men – if it values men as highly as it values machines...”

Labor, which made impatience for long-delayed justice for itself a vital motive force, cannot lack understanding of the Negro's impatience. It cannot speak, with the reactionaries' calm indifference, of progress around some obscure corner not yet possible even to see. There is a maxim in the law – justice too long delayed, is justice denied... The report of a committee may smother with legal constructions a list of complaints and dispose of it for the day. But if it buries a far larger truth it has disposed of nothing and made justice more elusive.”

Like Amos, Martin was calling loudly and clearly for justice as he saw the needy being trampled and poor being brought to ruin.

How do you imagine a farmer might hear and respond to Amos' words? Maybe some of you can let me know, either as part of the discussion after the sermon or another time!? Here's one, imaginative way:

Hey, Amos – we're just like you, tending our animals, working the land, trying to make ends meet and shooting craps every season with unknowns about the weather, which seed to buy, how to rotate the crops, whether to set aside some ecologically sensitive areas of your ground. We're faithful people, tilling (or not tilling) the land as carefully and conscientiously as we know how, proud of the work we do and the ways our forebears handed down to us a love and respect for the land, the understanding of God's command to care for it, steward it, make it productive. You're hollering terrible loud for a shepherd, Amos; we're quiet people, we live on the land, we like our wide open space, and as far as it's up to us, we live in peace.

Finally, I wonder how a member of the Kanza or Kaw tribe, one of the indigenous people of this land might hear and respond to this passage. A week ago today at the Kauffman Museum there was a virtual presentation by Florence Schloneger and Pauline Sharp that I'd like to share a snippet of. The two women learned to know each other when Florence began to research and

explore the possibilities of offering symbolic reparation payment to the Kaw nation after the sale of her family land. Florence is the 5th generation Mennonite landowner of acreage in McPherson County. Pauline is the grand-daughter of the first female chief of the Kaw tribe. Pauline refers to her grandmother Lucy and Lucy's brother Emmett, in this 5- minute clip. In this presentation, the two take turns sharing about their families' stories of the land. We'll hear from Pauline first and then Florence. (clip starts with Pauline saying, "In exchange for land..." and ends with Florence saying, "The privilege that land afforded me was the life blood of the Kaw and it was systematically taken away from them.")

Florence and her brother Ken have been able to make contributions of reparation to the Kaw people. Of course, one family's efforts can't right the wrongs that have been done to the indigenous population of a whole nation, but as Florence and Ken say, it's the offering of a symbolic reparation. It's an ideal perhaps, a place to start.

There's nothing particularly easy about hearing and embracing the prophetic words of Amos. He gives us some good food for thought, but the message is brutal, judgmental and without much grace. The words of Amos that we've heard so far this morning leave us without even much hope. So let's read just a little further. There's one more chapter in the book – chapter 9. The first few verse go on a bit more with God's anger and destruction. But then, in verse 11 we read:

"In that day I will restore David's fallen shelter – I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins – and will rebuild it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name," declares the Lord, who will do these things.

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile. They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the Lord your God.

I'm grateful for this difficult little book of Amos. In the kinds of times we're living in, it reminds us that there is reckoning that will be done. It reminds us that the hubris of humanity will not have the final say but that finally, God's justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.